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‘But that is not new’: Poetic Legacies of the First World War

Fran Brearton

...I remember

Not the war I fought in

But the one called Great

Which ended in a sepia November

Four years before my birth.¹

Vernon Scannell’s ‘The Great War’, first published in 1962, is perhaps the most explicit articulation of a legacy, felt at different times in different degrees, bequeathed to poets across the twentieth century: the inherited ‘memory’ of a war they did not experience. An historical, literary, and cultural legacy, it is also in some ways an unaccountable one. In *Poems of the First World War* (1988), Martin Stephen points out that:

The Second World War killed roughly five times as many people as did the first, brought untold destruction to civilian populations, and in its final throes unleashed a horror that could – and still can – wipe out life on earth. The facts, and logic, dictate that if any images dominate poetry they should be those of Hiroshima, Dachau, and Stalingrad. Certainly these images appear frequently in modern writing, but it is far easier to find the images of the Great War...²

Stephen’s historical ‘logic’, for anyone writing poetry post-1945, seems irrefutable. Nor is the legacy straightforwardly attributable to the literary reputations of its front-line combatants, and their subsequent influence on an Anglophone poetic tradition. If one looks to the ‘bigger’ war historically, one might also look for the ‘bigger’ and more influential names of modern literature. As Paul Fussell puts it: ‘The roster of major innovative talents who were not involved with the war is long and impressive.

It includes Yeats, Woolf, Pound, Eliot, Lawrence, and Joyce – that is, the masters of the modern movement. It was left to lesser talents...to recall in literary form a war they had actually experienced. Sassoon, Graves, and Blunden are clearly writers of the second rank.’³

Yet the facts speak for themselves – in the war’s pervasive presence through the literature of the last century; in a continuing fascination with Owen, Rosenberg, Thomas, and other literary casualties of 1914-18; and in the seemingly insatiable appetite for more work on the subject that the war still generates. As Stephen goes on to note, ‘The Great War seems to exert a terrible and perhaps terrified fascination over the modern imagination, and not only in terms of poetry’. The more the Great War is explicated, rationalised, and demythologised by historians, literary critics, writers, film-makers, journalists, *et al*, who feel the compulsion to ‘go over the ground again’⁴ – often to fight over it – the more manifest becomes an extraordinary ‘fascination’ above and beyond the ‘facts’, an enactment of the very cultural phenomenon that is also under scrutiny.

Paul Fussell’s equation of ‘involvement’ with combat experience, and his almost exclusively male roster of writers in *The Great War and Modern Memory*, serve to equate the ‘war poet’ with the ‘soldier poet’. By extension therefore, the custodian of memory is the 1914-18 veteran. And yet his choice of the word ‘recall’ is suggestive beyond the combatant (trench warfare) experience his seminal study habitually privileges as embodying the ‘memory’ of war. To recall (*OED*) is ‘to remember’; but first and foremost it is ‘to call back’, ‘to bring back’. In his closing chapter on ‘Persistence and Memory’, he notes that ‘Everyone fighting a modern war tends to think of it in terms of the last one he knows anything about. [...] The act of fighting a war becomes something like an unwitting act of conservative memory, and even of elegy’.⁵ Keith Douglas, for example, the World War Two poet killed in action in 1944, three days after D-day, consciously reflects on the ‘tautology’ inherent in articulating the experience of a subsequent war in ‘Desert Flowers’:

Living in a wide landscape are the flowers –
Rosenberg I only repeat what you were saying –
the shell and the hawk every hour
are slaying men and jerboas, slaying

the mind: but the body can fill
the hungry flowers and the dogs who cry words
at nights, the most hostile things of all.
But that is not new.⁶

The poem is both elegy (for Rosenberg) and self-elegy, anticipating as it does his own fate as 'not new'. Douglas's desert war, seemingly remote from Flanders fields, nevertheless reinvokes the familiar landscape of 1914-18 – the rats, Rosenberg's 'poppies whose roots are in man's veins', the continual bombardment, a hostile 'enemy' other than the opposing army (in the Great War, rats, lice, mud). 1939-45 is 'remembered' through 1914-18. Paul Fussell himself – as critic and cultural historian – exemplifies the argument he propounds that the Great War has 'become Great in another sense – all-encompassing, all-pervading, both internal and external at once, the essential condition of consciousness in the twentieth century'.⁷ A veteran of World War II, who fought with American forces in France in 1944, he is nonetheless haunted by World War I. *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975) is powerful and compelling even where it is controversial, one of the most influential texts on war to have been published in the decades since 1945; its 'companion' volume, the subsequent study of the war he fought in, *Wartime: Understanding and Behaviour in the Second World War* (1989) much less so.

Poems that draw on, respond to, and 'remember' the Great War are numerous, (if not as numerous as they once were, of which more anon); but my focus here is on a handful of poems by poets in whose *oeuvres* the war is particularly compelling, for reasons familial, experiential, and generational (and therefore historically specific, coinciding with and in part accounting for, in the 1960s and 1970s, one of several 'revivals' of interest in the Great War).⁸ That is, those whose fathers and uncles fought in the war and survived to share memories directly; or those who have served in the army – those, in other words, for whom the war has been part of their social and cultural landscape, a still-living memory around them. For poets such as Ted Hughes (1930-98) or Michael Longley (b.1939), the act of 'Recalling War', as Robert Graves puts it in 1935, in one of the few of his post-1918 poems to address his own war explicitly, is 'A sight to be recalled in elder days / When learnedly the future we devote / To yet more boastful visions of despair'.⁹ It is a remembering forwards as well as backwards. Graves, recalling war at a point in the 1930s where the mood had

already shifted from being ‘post-war’ to ‘pre-war’, acknowledges the anachronisms, the ‘antiqueness of romance’ in wartime (‘old importances came swimming back ... A weapon at the thigh, surgeons at call...’) as against a harsh reality, and anticipates, in ‘boastful visions of despair’, the cyclical repetition of history and its motifs – what Douglas later finds to be ‘not new’, and what Longley too, following on from Douglas, finds himself ‘nearly repeat[ing]’ in the 1970s.¹⁰

For Vernon Scannell, a veteran of World War Two (who fought in the Middle East and Normandy, and who deserted in 1945), it is the earlier war that liberates his poetic voice in the 1960s. His reputation as a war poet is founded on collections such as *Walking Wounded* (1965) and *Epithets of War* (1969) in which are evident the profound influence of Sassoon, and of the Great War’s landscape and motifs, on his own wartime experience. ‘The Great War’, from 1962, is formally slightly unusual in his *oeuvre* in that it breaks up its own instinctive pull towards (rhymed) iambic pentameter, but the ‘default’ setting still shadows the lines as his memory too habitually returns to a default setting on the 1914-18 western front:

Whenever war is spoken of
I find
The war that was called Great invades the mind:
The grey militia marches over land
A darker mood of grey
Where fractured tree-trunks stand
...
These things I see,
But they are only part
Of what it is that slyly probes the heart...¹¹

The poem is pulled towards the traditional, even the clichéd; its landscape is ‘learned’ from literary and cultural representation, not experienced directly; what ‘invades the mind’ here is less the war than inherited ‘memory’ of it. The poem draws on all the expected Great War elements – ‘iron brambles’, ‘corpses on the wire’, ‘Duckboards, mud and rats’, the ‘bugle’s hoarse, sweet cry’, ‘grey earth’, ‘crimson flowers’ – to end, tellingly, with the war’s own end in a ‘sepia November’. If the poet isn’t wearing

rose-tinted spectacles, he is nonetheless aware of the 'sepia' tint of memory, the lure of nostalgic images that both soften and preserve.¹²

Scannell, in some respects a relatively slight poet, here acknowledges that which 'probes the heart': the seductiveness of the 'tunes' – '*A long, long trail, The Rose of No-Man's-Land, / Home Fires and Tipperary*' – that 'creep into the mind' (like a creeping barrage); the emotional haunting wherein 'reason darkens'. 'The Great War' is not a poem that reverberates much beyond the fact of emotional identification, although it may trigger that emotion in its reader too. In contrast, a darker haunting is ever-present in the imagination of Ted Hughes, for whom the First World War is part of his childhood landscape – and at the core of the primal, sometimes apocalyptic, thrust of his poems. Hughes's father was one of only 17 survivors of a regiment of the Lancashire Fusiliers slaughtered at Gallipoli, and would sometimes share stories of the war with his son; William Hughes was also, as Elaine Feinstein notes, 'so shattered by the experience' that 'nightmares had him calling out in his sleep'.¹³ The war's effect on the life of the Yorkshire valley in which he grew up was such that Ted Hughes would later write of his home ground:

The people are not detached enough from the stone, as if they were only half-born from the earth, and the graves are too near the surface. A disaster seems to hang around in the air there for a long time. I can never escape the impression that the whole region is in mourning for the First World War.¹⁴

Hughes's mud, blood and violence in the 1950s and 1960s are less stylised and sepia-tinted than they are visceral and immediate: in 'Six Young Men', the photograph of local men doomed to die in the Great War that inspires the poem may be 'faded and ochre-tinged', but it becomes the site of 'contradictory permanent horrors' that 'shoulder out / One's own body from its instant and heat'.¹⁵ 'Bayonet Charge', another poem which shows his debt to Owen, is a nightmare reliving, over and over again, of trauma, another 'permanent horror[s]: 'Suddenly he awoke and was running – raw / In raw-seamed hot khaki, his sweat heavy...'.¹⁶

In his introduction to Keith Douglas's poems, Hughes writes:

Owen carried about, in his pocket, photographs of trench horrors which he would evidently have liked to see magnified and put on public display in

London, his idea being to shock his non-participant fellow-citizens into an awareness of the new day dawning in the trenches. One can't help wondering how much of this passionately formulated but frustrated motive diverted itself into the graphic focus and massive, direct appeal of his poetry. When he declared 'The Poetry Does Not Matter' what he also meant was that in the poems nothing mattered but truth to the facts, the deepest possible grasp of the human implications of the facts, and expressiveness – irresistible communication on the most private, the most affecting level. The poetic style which he bred...the basic simplicity, the shocking directness, the colloquial flexibility...was a means to this end...After perfecting this means, and producing a few examples of what could be done with it, Owen died and bequeathed it to others.¹⁷

In 'Wilfred Owen's Photographs' (the title not obviously explicable from the body of the poem), confrontation with the 'human implications of the facts' serves as an indictment of those abstract 'virtues' – patriotism, glory, honour, pride – also subverted and redefined by Owen. The poem recounts Parliament's resistance in the 1870s to a call for the abolition of flogging in the British Navy. In a manner reminiscent of the Battle of Waterloo, 'Parliament / Squared against the motion': the 'old school tie' mentality satirised in the poem sees the institutionalised brutality as 'No shame but a monument - / Trafalgar not better known'.

Yet when the 'cat-o'-nine-tails' itself is brought into the house and 'The gentry finger[ing] its stained tails', then 'quietly, unopposed, / The motion was passed'¹⁸. The 'stained tails' of the whip are also, in a sense, the bloodstained hands (tails) of the gentry (now between their legs). As Gifford and Roberts note, Hughes has sometimes been criticised for a 'poetry of violence', yet that 'impression' may be 'outweighed by poems that react with horror to human violence',¹⁹ and to human suffering. Hughes's reading of Owen (as also of Douglas) marks continuities with his own aesthetic; his early war poems illuminate and critique a human capacity for political violence as telling and as discomfiting as that offered by his precursors. The 'shocking directness' characteristic of Hughes's style is expressed in a diction, dense and alliterative, that bombards the reader with an extraordinary energy: in 'Bayonet Charge', we are 'dazzled with rifle fire', 'Bullets smacking the belly'; in 'Out' the poet's father is 'recovering / From the four-year mastication by gunfire and mud /

Body buffeted wordless ... His memory's buried, immovable anchor / Among jaw-bones and blown-off boots, tree-stumps, shellcases and craters...).²⁰

For Hughes, the Great War landscape expands to underwrite an exploration of man's place in the world, his control over, or control by, the forces of nature. In this, he partly follows Robert Graves (from whom he is otherwise remote in style). Graves's recalling war is also a coming to terms with the experience of war through the evolution of a complex mythological belief system, outlined in *The White Goddess* in 1948. In the introduction to *The White Goddess*, he argues that that poetry was 'once a warning to man that he must keep harmony with the family of living creatures among which he was born...[but] is now a reminder that he has disregarded the warnings, turned the house upside down by capricious experiments in philosophy, science and industry, and brought ruin on himself and his family'.²¹ In a passage added to a revised edition of 1952 (the edition read by Hughes), the Cold War and the capability for destruction, evident in the atomic bombs that devastated Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 and confirmed by the post-1945 development of the infinitely more powerful thermonuclear, or hydrogen bomb,²² inform a Gravesian vision that verges on the apocalyptic: 'we have come to be governed, in practice, by the unholy triumvirate of Pluto god of wealth, Apollo god of science, and Mercury god of thieves. To make matters worse, dissension and jealousy rage openly between these three, with Mercury and Pluto blackguarding each other, while Apollo wields the atomic bomb as if it were a thunderbolt.'²³

The summer of 1914 is often perceived as a watershed, the point in history that marked the beginnings of a new, modern, ironic sensibility, or as Larkin puts it 'Never such innocence again';²⁴ the brutalities of modern warfare in 1914-18 were such that they set the terms for responses to war in 1939-45, for what was not 'new'. But post-war poets drawn to the First World War write from a context where total annihilation, not simply total war, is possible, in which apocalyptic visions are scientifically achievable realities – and that *is* new. While Hughes writes a number of poems directly about the Great War, its landscape and images spill out into other poems about nature – as if it has become as uncontrollable as the forces of violence unleashed in the century that followed it. 'November' is a poem in which the war is unmentioned, but everywhere present:

And again the rains' dragging grey columns

Smudged the farms. In a moment
The fields were jumping and smoking; the thorns
Quivered, riddled with the glass verticals.
[...]
The hill where the hare crouched with clenched teeth.
Rain plastered the land till it was shining
Like hammered lead, and I ran...²⁵

The poem is in part derivative of Owen's 'Exposure', where 'war lasts, rain soaks' and 'Dawn...Attacks once more in ranks on shivering ranks of grey', or of 'Spring Offensive' where 'the sky burned / with fury against them'.²⁶ Its language intimates the moments immediately before and during a trench warfare attack; the tramp in the ditch is taken 'for dead'; the 'keeper's gibbet had owls and hawks / By the neck'. The war becomes more than the sum of its parts in Hughes, here less an 'instrument of policy' that must 'bear its character...measure with its scale', as Clausewitz defined war,²⁷ than a life/death struggle with the 'predatory, destructive character of nature', of which man is yet still a part.²⁸ The sheer size of Hughes's *oeuvre*, and the growing epic ambition of his poem-sequences, are also telling: the poet rains down death and violence, blood and dismemberment, the verbal excess of the poems encompassing both the darkness and a resistance to it, as if the language itself is a counter-blasting life force. In 'Scapegoats and Rabies', the 'dead millions' of ghost- soldiers are:

Marching in their boots, blindfold and riddled,
Rotten heads on their singing shoulders,
The blown-off right hand swinging to the stride
Of the stump-scorched and blown-off legs
Helpless in the terrible engine of the boots.²⁹

Trying to explain the incommunicability of the Great War experience in language, Robert Graves observed that 'you can't communicate noise. Noise never stopped for one moment – ever'.³⁰ That noise is the sound of death; but to hear it is to be among the living, not the dead. If one is tempted, amid the sometimes cacophonous verbal

din of such poems by Hughes, to cry ‘enough’, yet to be bombarded with more, that may be part of the point.

Hughes is one of the most war-haunted of post-1945 British poets (along with Geoffrey Hill and Christopher Logue). In Ireland, the Great War is a subject which Michael Longley has, in the context of the Northern Irish ‘Troubles’, and in a politically fraught climate, made peculiarly his own. Like Hughes, Longley is the son of an English First World War veteran; for both, an imaginative preoccupation with the Great War informs their writing about the natural world. But the similarities really end there: at odds with Hughes’s ‘graphic focus’, primal energies, and flaunting excess is Longley’s elegiac mode and restrained style. (It is to over-simplify of course, but where Hughes reveals a considerable stylistic and thematic debt to Owen, Longley’s more obvious Great War precursor, and the subject of a number of his elegies, is Edward Thomas.) Where Hughes, in ‘Out’, characterises his four-year old self as his father’s ‘luckless double’, in a poem from the mid-1960s, ‘In Memoriam’, Longley posits his origins, metaphorically, twenty years before his birth, in the landscape of the Great War:

But, as it was, your proper funeral urn
Had mercifully smashed to smithereens,
To shrapnel shards that sliced your testicle.
That instant I, your most unlikely son,
In No Man’s Land was surely left for dead,
Blotted out from your far horizon.
As your voice now is locked inside my head,
I yet was held secure, waiting my turn.³¹

The landscape becomes, in Longley’s poetry, the origin of much that follows in the 20th century, as the historical fault-lines of the Great War period continue to haunt Irish history. Yet as ‘In Memoriam’ makes clear, it is the private rather than public utterance here – the grief for a father ‘lingering in the hall, your bowels on fire, / Tears in your eyes, and all your medals spent’ – which gives the poet his elegiac voice. For Longley, as for Hughes, the Great War is an enduring legacy, one which increases in significance through his own development; but in contrast to Hughes, it does not become the archetype for a Manichean struggle between the forces of light and dark.

Rather, it is a testing ground for poetry's capacity both to remember honestly, and potentially to heal. As he was 'held secure' by the past, that past, it is intimated, will be 'secure' with him, as a custodian of memory. At the close of 'In Memoriam', it is the poet's role 'To summon' imaginatively for his dying father the 'lost wives', 'chorus girls and countesses' of his post-war love affairs to accompany and shield him 'Underground': 'On the verge of light and happy legend / They lift their skirts like blinds across your eyes'.

That his father's 'old wounds woke / As cancer' in 'In Memoriam' resonates on other levels too. War experience is not left behind in 1918; its survivors 'go over the ground again' – emotionally, even physically. History takes us over the ground again too, since in Northern Ireland 'old wounds' resurfaced in 1968 to devastating effect. In 'Wounds', one of the most powerful of all post-war Great War poems, Longley sets 'two pictures from my father's head' of the western front, beside the deaths in Northern Ireland of 'teenage soldiers, bellies full of /Bullets and Irish beer', and a 'bus conductor' who was:

....shot through the head
By a shivering boy who wandered in
Before they could turn the television down
Or tidy away the supper dishes.
To the children, to a bewildered wife,
I think 'Sorry Missus' was what he said.³²

The 'landscape of dead buttocks' in 'Wounds' over which his father followed for 'fifty years' is a permanent condition: past and present are telescoped into a terrifying continuity. War is no longer something incomprehensible and 'elsewhere' since it encroaches on domestic, private space. So from its private, familial beginnings, the Great War has expanded, looking forwards as well as backwards, to become the direct subject of more than twenty of Longley's poems, indirectly informing many more – the elegies for Troubles victims, such as 'Wreaths'; poems about World War Two and the Holocaust (as in 'Ghetto'); poems from Homer's *Iliad* (notably 'Ceasefire'). In 'Edward Thomas's Poem' he describes Thomas as 'The nature poet turned into war poet as if / He could cure death with the rub of a dock leaf'.³³ The poem qualifies ('as if') any claim that might be made for what war poetry can or cannot do, in its curative

or consolatory aspirations; at the same time, the memory-work these poems undertake is a means of understanding a contemporary condition, and their care and precision with language is a felt ethical responsibility as well as a stylistic trait. '[A]s Wilfred Owen stated over 50 years ago', he writes, 'it is the artist's duty to warn, to be tuned in before anyone else to the implications of a situation'.³⁴

Longley, and other poets writing out of conflict, look to the Great War, and to the example set by poets in the Great War, as a means of evaluating their own role and responsibility. And they understand them differently: witness the divergent readings of Owen by Hughes, Longley, or Seamus Heaney. In *The Government of the Tongue*, Heaney's reflections on song and suffering lead him to describe 'Wilfred Owen, and others like him in the trenches of Flanders' as 'among the first of a type of poet...who looms as a kind of shadowy judging figure above every poet who has written subsequently...[who] represents poetry's solidarity with the doomed, the deprived, the victimized, the under-privileged'.³⁵ Yet ultimately, he eschews the aesthetic he attributes to Owen, drawn instead to Mandelstam and the poets of Eastern bloc countries whose 'situation', he argues, 'makes them attractive to a reader whose formative experience has been largely Irish'.³⁶ In contrast to Longley, the Great War does not haunt Heaney's imagination. If this might seem surprising in a Troubles elegist of Heaney's calibre, it does suggest that the poetic legacy of the Great War is not separable from its political legacy in a way more readily apparent in Ireland than in England, and that an Irish (or indeed English) 'formative experience' can be infinitely variable. As John Horne noted recently:

...[The Great War] contributed decisively to the major turning-point of twentieth century Irish history, 1913-1923, which saw a polarisation and realignment of national and political identities that has lasted to the present. Since divergent versions of the war experience lay at the heart of those opposed identities, it is not surprising that the war's legacy should have proved so contested nor that Irish war experiences – North and South, male and female, military and civilian, unionist and nationalist – should so rarely be placed in a common framework.³⁷

In the only poem in which he addresses the Great War directly, 'In Memoriam: Francis Ledwidge', Heaney struggles with a legacy he cannot reconcile with

subsequent 'realignment[s]'. Ledwidge, the Irish Catholic nationalist poet and British army soldier killed in 1917 is, for Heaney, 'our dead enigma' in whom 'all the strains / Criss-cross in useless equilibrium'.³⁸ Competing histories converge on the poem, as on the Great War battlefields, and they get stuck there; the poem's only resolution (with an echo of Owen's 'Strange Meeting') is that both Protestant and Catholic dead 'consort now underground'. It is as if the legacy left by Ledwidge has become culturally unintelligible to a writer of Heaney's particular experience; at the same time, the poem takes on the burden of a legacy it does not understand to perform its own act of recovery.

'The dodderly English veterans are getting / Fewer', Longley writes in 1994, 'and point out to fewer dodderly pals / Hill Sixty, Hill Sixty-one, Poelkapelle'.³⁹ The last British combat veteran of the Great War died in 2011; the last survivor of trench warfare in 2009. No-one now can have the privilege, or pain, of firsthand memories from the Great War shared with them, and the effect that may have on the war's legacy as it has manifested itself thus far is as yet unknown. Yet some changes are evident. In *The Great War and Modern Memory*, in 1975, Fussell writes that:

The whole texture of British daily life could be said to commemorate the war still. It is remembered in the odd pub-closing hours, one of the fruits of the Defence of the Realm Act...The Great War persists in many of the laws controlling aliens and repressing sedition and espionage. "D"-notices to newspapers, warning them off 'national-security matters,' are another legacy. So is Summer Time. So are such apparent universals as cigarette-smoking, the use of wristwatches [...] Egg and chips became popular during the war because both bacon and steak were scarce and costly. It...remains a staple of public menus [...] A sign of the unique persistence of the war in England is literally a sign, above a large section of shelves in Hatchard's Bookshop, Piccadilly. I have seen nothing like it in any other country. It reads: 'Biography and War Memoirs,' in recognition of a distinct and very commonly requested English genre. [...] The current economic bankruptcy of Britain is another way it remembers. From 1914 to 1918 its gold reserve diminished dramatically. The beneficiary was the United States...⁴⁰

Such passages now commemorate not only 1914-18, but aspects of ‘British daily life’ that have disappeared in the decades since the 1970s. If egg-and-chips remains popular, and the clock changes endure for practical reasons, the ‘odd pub-closing hours’ have gone; so too has ‘cigarette smoking’ as a ‘universal’ (it’s now, indeed, a prohibited activity in public places); the sign in Hatchard’s has long disappeared – no-one there remembers it; media culture has been transformed since the 1990s, in large part through technological developments; the global financial situation of the last decade, and the shifts in economic power, render his argument historical too. The world Fussell describes was still relatively familiar through the 1980s, but it has become less recognisable to a generation born since then, and is now itself the stuff of nostalgia.

A number of centenaries loom in which the Great War will be commemorated by a society for whom it stands now at the same remove the 1815 Battle of Waterloo stood for its participants. That the Great War’s literature will endure seems certain; whether the war will prove, in the future, and for a new generation of poets, as hauntingly pervasive a ‘remembered’ presence in the fabric British and Irish verse as it has been through the 20th century, may be less so. Yet as more and more images of the early 20th century emerge, they can still, it is apparent, ‘[f]resh images beget’.⁴¹ For Sinéad Morrissey in ‘Electric Edwardians’ (2008), a poem inspired by the 1901-6 films of Mitchell and Kenyon, the long-dead wave their handkerchiefs with a poignant immediacy from the recovered footage ‘at whoever may prove their witness: /themselves, their wives, coal miners, tram conductors, / Boer War veterans...not to mention the unthinkable yet-to-be-born, / not to mention me’.⁴² It is also, in its collapse of time and space, past and future, an elegy for the not-yet-dead of the Great War:

children linger longest in the foreground,
shoving, lampooning, breaking the line,
or simply staring back at us, across the lens’s promise

as though we still held Passchendaele in our pockets
and could find a way to save them.

Their fate foreshadowed in the broken 'line', the ghost children 'staring back at us' are emblematic of a century's victims, from the Great War through the Holocaust and into the present day, for whom the 'promise' of the future is broken too. They cannot now be saved, yet insisting from beyond the grave on their presence in the 'foreground' of the mind, and stored in the poem's memory, they 'linger longest'.

¹ Vernon Scannell, 'The Great War', *Selected Poems* (London: Allison & Busby Ltd., 1971), 40.

² Martin Stephen, *Poems of the First World War: 'Never Such Innocence'* (1988; London: J.M. Dent, 1993), 289.

³ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (London: OUP, 1975), 313-14.

⁴ The phrase is Edmund Blunden's. See the 'Preliminary' to *Undertones of War* (1928; London: Penguin, 1982), 8.

⁵ Fussell, *The Great War*, 314.

⁶ Keith Douglas, *The Complete Poems*, intro. Ted Hughes (Oxford: OUP, 1987), 102.

⁷ Fussell, *The Great War*, 321.

⁸ The first of these popularly begins with the publication of E.M. Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, followed by a stream of war memoirs in the late 1920s and early 1930s; the second, in the 1960s, is marked by such productions as *Oh What a Lovely War*, together with new histories, and anthologies of Great War poetry; the third might be placed in the late 1990s/early 2000s, and the respective 80/90 year Armistice commemorations, the last for which any British wartime veterans were still alive.

⁹ Robert Graves, *Complete Poems: Vol. 2*, ed Beryl Graves and Dunstan Ward (Manchester: Carcanet, 1997), 92.

¹⁰ See Michael Longley, 'Bog Cotton', *Collected Poems* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2009), 136.

¹¹ Scannell, *Selected Poems*, 39-40. Although it is to speculate about numerology, the broken pentameter brings the number of lines in the poem to 45, marking the end of the second war, and 'terror ticks on wrists at zero hour' on line 14, the date the first war began.

¹² The function of sepia in photography was to help prevent black and white images from degrading over time, as well as rendering them less stark visually.

¹³ Elaine Feinstein, *Ted Hughes: The Life of a Poet* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 2001), 6.

¹⁴ Quoted in Keith Sagar, ed., *The Achievement of Ted Hughes* (Manchester: MUP, 1983), 10.

¹⁵ Ted Hughes, *Collected Poems*, ed. Paul Keegan (London: Faber, 2003), 45-6.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁷ Hughes, 'Introduction' to Keith Douglas, *Complete Poems*, p.xxvi

¹⁸ Hughes, *Collected Poems*, 78-9.

¹⁹ Terry Gifford and Neil Roberts, *Ted Hughes: A Critical Study* (London: Faber, 1981), 13.

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- ²⁰ Hughes, *Collected Poems*, 43, 165.
- ²¹ Robert Graves, *The White Goddess* (London: Faber, 1948), 11-12.
- ²² This was tested by the US and USSR respectively in 1952 and 1953. The hydrogen bomb worked by fusing atoms rather than – as with the atomic bomb – by splitting them, and had the potential to ‘make real Clausewitz’s vision of a total and therefore purposeless war’. John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War* (London; Penguin, 2005), 61-3.
- ²³ Robert Graves, *The White Goddess*, rev. ed. (1948; London: Faber, 1952), 468.
- ²⁴ Philip Larkin, ‘MCXIV’, *Collected Poems*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (London: Faber, 2003), 99.
- ²⁵ Hughes, *Collected Poems*, 81-2.
- ²⁶ Jon Stallworthy, ed., *The Poems of Wilfred Owen* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1990), 162, 169.
- ²⁷ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (1832) trans. J.J. Graham and ed. Anatol Rapaport (London: Penguin, 1982), 410.
- ²⁸ See Gifford and Roberts, *Ted Hughes*, 14.
- ²⁹ Hughes, *Collected Poems*, 187.
- ³⁰ Quoted in Fussell, *The Great War*, 170.
- ³¹ Longley, *Collected Poems*, 30-1.
- ³² *Ibid.*, 62.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, 307.
- ³⁴ Michael Longley, ‘Introduction’, *Causeway: the Arts in Ulster* (Belfast: Arts Council of Northern Ireland; Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1971), 8.
- ³⁵ Seamus Heaney, *The Government of the Tongue* (London: Faber, 1988), p.xvi. Heaney’s affinity with Owen lies more in what he describes as Owen’s ‘violent assault...upon the genteel citadel of English pastoral verse’ (p.xiv), since his very early poems, mediated by the powerful influence of Hughes, follow this line too
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.xx.
- ³⁷ John Horne, ‘Introduction’, *Our War* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy/RTÉ, 2008)
- ³⁸ Seamus Heaney, *Field Work* (London: Faber, 1979), 59-60.
- ³⁹ Longley, ‘A Pat of Butter’, *Collected Poems*, 224.
- ⁴⁰ Fussell, *The Great War*, 315-7.
- ⁴¹ W.B. Yeats, ‘Byzantium’, *Collected Poems* (London: Macmillan, 1950), 281.
- ⁴² Sinéad Morrissey, *Through the Square Window* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2009), 55-6.